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AUTHOR Ahrendt, Kenneth H.
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ABSTRACT

Content areas teachers must assume responsibility for teaching students the basic reading skills that are necessary for achieving success in their field. Content teachers frequently must be convinced that reading skills are a valid part of their curriculum and must be given help in teaching these skills. They should be shown that the teaching of reading skills can be incorporated into the ongoing process of presenting their content area to students. One major skill content teachers can help students learn is the ability to formulate a purpose for reading each assignment. Another major skill is vocabulary development. Content teachers should develop methods for introducing new vocabulary words and making students aware of their meanings. Since words have no inherent meaning, but have different meanings for different persons and in different contexts, word meanings must be developed in the contexts in which they are found. (GW)

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THE ROLE OF THE CONTENT AREA TEACHER AND THE TEACHING OF READING

Kenneth M. Ahrendt

In order to set the scene for my remarks about the role of the content area teacher and the teaching of reading, we must examine some basic facts upon which this notion - that content area teachers teach reading - is based.

First and foremost we must keep in mind that reading is not a separate subject to be taught at a particular time and a particular place, but is a process which must permeate each subject in the total curriculum. If we examine this statement critically, reading is not a body of knowledge with its own content but rather an ongoing, developmental process that begins when we learn to read and ends when we die.

Reading is one of the most complex tasks man has devised for himself. Because man's quest for new learning is unquenchable, the reading process is never stationary. It is rather preposterous to assume that even the brightest child given the finest instruction at the elementary level can develop within a six year period the reading skills needed to assimilate the vast amount of knowledge presented at the secondary school level.

The importance which our society attaches to formal schooling is reflected in the fact that today more Canadians are attending school, and on the average are remaining longer than before. Furthermore, research has clearly demonstrated a positive relationship between skill in reading and success in content subjects. Yet, thousands of Canadian children are frustrated by their secondary

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schooling because there is a definite lag in the development of the general or specific reading skills that could contribute to successful growth in the secondary school.

It is suggested that a probable cause, and one that is supported by research, for the poor reading performance of many secondary students is that a large proportion of those students who are not reading as well as their general ability indicates they should is due to the fact that (1) secondary readers either have never been taught to prepare themselves to read, or (2) have been unable to transfer this preparation skill to new reading assignments. We know that most poor readers are passive readers; that is, readers who expect the writer to be responsible for capturing and building their interest, explaining his terminology, and so presenting his material that they need merely to gaze at it to grasp its meaning.

Reading is not a generalized skill that, once developed, can be applied in a special field. Rather, reading involves the ability to interpret this or that particular area of experience. Basic instruction, no matter how excellent it is, is not enough. Reading abilities must be developed in the areas where they can be used. No teacher can safely assume that the basic reading abilities and skills a student has achieved in the elementary school will automatically trabsfer to the special fields of study in the junior and senior high school.

The nature of experience the students have with reading in the various content areas will determine their growth in reading ability

and the development of a positive attitude toward both reading and learning. Therefore, it becomes the concern of the content area teacher to assume the responsibility for teaching the basic skills which are necessary for achieving success in his content to the students in his classroom. Any teacher who uses printed matter as a vehicle of instruction assumes the responsibility to teach students how to use this material effectively and efficiently for maximum learning.

READING AND THE CONTENT TEACHER

There is much confusion about the responsibility content teachers have for teaching reading skills. The most satisfactory way to define teaching reading through content is to compare the approach of the reading teacher with that of the content teacher. Each has a specific set; each has a curriculum to teach.

Although the reading teacher's responsibilities include the improvement of reading for all students, he is frequently called upon to help students who are deficient in reading skills. His basic approach is commonly one of diagnosis and prescription. The reading materials he uses may not come from any of the content areas since his concern is to provide material which will interest the student and at the same time be appropriate to practice the specific reading skills to be developed.

The content teacher has a defined field of information and ideas which he presents in a variety of ways to students. He is

usually more concerned with the subject itself than with the development of any specific reading skills.

The two roles do not overlap. The content area teacher is not basically a teacher of reading. He is an expert in his field of study, for example, English, social studies, mathematics, science, business education, health, home economics, industrial arts, agricultural education, electronics, music and art. As a specialist his main concern is to help students learn his subject - to acquire the important skills, to comprehend the essential content and to use such skills and knowledge to answer specific questions or in solving problems. He knows the technical vocabulary that must be learned, the sequence of learning, and the concepts the student must develop in order to have a complete and accurate picture of the subject matter being studied.

One reason why content area teachers have failed to embrace the notion that "all teachers are teachers of reading" is that they have not in the past been clear as to why they should be. They do not see reading related to the basic purpose of the content field in such a fashion as to make clear the significance of reading problems, nor what they, as content teachers, may do to assist in solving such problems.

No matter how poorly or how well high school students read, every high school teacher can help them to read with better understanding of the textbook and other materials that they are required to read in his or her course. No matter whether previous teachers did

a poor or good job of training students to read, this teacher can aid his students to develop reading skills, habits, and attitudes that are necessary not only to pass his course but also to achieve more in it.

The reluctance of junior high and secondary school instructors to teach content area reading usually stems from the simple fact that they have had little or no training in the teaching of reading in the content area. Content teachers must be convinced that reading skills, or maybe we should call them learning skills, are a valid part of their curriculum. These teachers need instruction and help in how to teach these skills. We must take the attitude that all teachers are responsible for the reading and learning skills required in their particular content areas.

A major area of need is for the content teachers to understand the skill prerequisites for learning the tasks they assign students. Most content teachers have never paused to consider the many learning and study skills required for a student to complete a simple-sounding assignment such as "read and outline the next chapter." If the teacher can come to realize the complexity of such tasks and then learn to provide instruction to enable students to carry out all aspects of the task, better learning of the content can be achieved.

All content teachers use reading in their classrooms. However, what is important for them to realize is that knowledge of specific content is of far less importance to the student that strong, positive attitudes toward learning and toward mastery of skills that

will make it possible for him to go on learning as long as he lives. Therefore, one of the major responsibilities of every secondary content teacher is to teach students in all his classes efficient ways to read and study better in his particular field. These ways may differ considerably from efficient ways to read and study in some other field.

The most important factor is to present to the content area teacher the strategies and skills necessary to teach reading in his content. However, this must be done in such a way that these skills and strategies are incorporated into the ongoing process of presenting the content to the students. It is unreasonable to expect a content teacher to become receptive to the idea of teaching vocabulary, study skills and comprehension in his content if he is asked to take time from teaching the content. These skills must be integrated into the teaching strategies used by the content teacher as he moves through his course.

Some subjects have special skills which are pertinent to that particular content area due to its composition and nature. Industrial Arts is replete with visual aids and illustrations which must be read and understood by the student. Mathematics has a language of symbols which must be translated by the student. Literature has many different skills of reading which change with each genre used.

Some skills are basic to the successful reading of all printed materials. The printed word must be decoded into speech,

either audibly or inaudibly, and a level of understanding must be attained in order that the purpose for reading be accomplished. Here is a major and most important skill a content area teacher can impart to his students - purpose for reading any selection, book, chapter, article or whatever. If we would take a few minutes to review the material we want students to read and then structure purpose questions as a guide to the student's reading of the passage we are teaching a study skill and an invaluable learning tool. With purpose the student can read for answers and comprehension takes place. The total time spent by the content teacher in preparation - 15 minutes at most. The student benefits because he can approach his reading task with direction and a guide for gaining the information you want them to have. Always remember the purpose for learning in any content area should be made clear at the beginning of the learning activity. Let students know what they are going to learn, how they should learn, and why they should learn. Giving the student a purpose for learning narrows his attention and allows him to focus on smaller areas of the learning activity with greater intensity.

GOALS FOR READING

1. Reading to answer a specific question or questions raised by the teacher.
2. Reading to identify details in a selection.
3. Reading to collect all information relative to a specific question.

4. Reading to obtain directions.

5. Reading to discover the sequence of events.

Many other goals or purposes for reading can be identified by a teacher.

Every content teacher will readily admit that a student's knowledge of vocabulary is of paramount importance if the student is to master the content. Here we refer to vocabulary as the language of the content used to communicate ideas. both the teacher and the student use this vocabulary to communicate ideas pertinent to the content subject; and the student uses this vocabulary to think ABSTRACTLY ABOUT THE SUBJECT. Ability to communicate in the language of a subject required that one have facility with that language; hence the need for emphasis on vocabulary development in each subject.

It is important that when the content teacher plans his teaching strategies he must include in these strategies some method of introducing new vocabulary words and making his students aware of these words and their meaning. Words to be emphasized in vocabulary development by the content teacher rise out of what is being studied. Words to be studied and emphasized come from the textbook used and when words emphasized by the teacher correspond to those which the students encounter in their texts greater comprehension takes place. Teachers should explain technical vocabulary they will use orally in class during discussion and lecture. It is known that if a student does not recognize a vocabulary word in his reading he will many times ignore the word. Students frequently fail to understand what is read,

because the vocabulary is not within their experience. The student will recognize the unfamiliar word and be fully aware that he doesn't know the meaning. The reader brings meaning to the word through his background of experience and the concepts he has developed during the course of his education and his lifetime.

Students should be taught early that words have no inherent meaning. Many adults, including some teachers, have never learned that words do not have meaning, and they add to a student's confusion about words and meaning by saying, "Look at the word, tell me the meaning." If words had meaning one would only need to hear and pronounce a word and meaning would emerge.

Words are no more than agreed upon symbols that represent certain concepts according to Marksheffel. The meaning a particular word has for the student may be quite different than the meaning the word has for the teacher. The meaning of words resides within each person and is derived from his experience with it. Because no two people ever have the same experiences, they do not have the same meaning for a word nor do they attach the same connotations to its use. Thus a student may think that a root is the part of a plant that grows below the ground, but this is not certainly the meaning or concept a mathematics teacher would have for the same word. Human experiences, however, are sufficiently similar within a certain culture to make communication with words a reality.

Because a student can pronounce a word, and because he knows a meaning or two for that word, he may think he knows the word every

time he sees or hears it. This is simply not true. The same word in our language can have several meanings depending upon the context in which we find the word. Common words may be used in new and strange combinations requiring the reader to adjust his understanding of them. The perpetually interesting thing about words is the ease with which they may be put into new, fresh and startling combinations. These new combinations make the real difference between dull and imaginative writing. They also make the difference between simple and complex reading.

Most of our common, everyday words have more than one common meaning. These different meanings, however, are not revealed by the word when it stands alone. Often sentences in which the word appears decides the meaning of the word. The sentence surrounds the word like a mold, and shapes its exact meaning. The sentence is called the context of the word.

A word out of context is like a fish out of water; it is without sense or life. For example, the familiar word "take" has no meaning printed alone on the page; it is a word out of context. But as soon as it is placed within a sentence, "Tom has to take a bus to get to school." "take" assumes the meaning of "use." In another sentence, "This bus will take you to the city," take has the meaning of "carry." See the differences in the meaning of the same word - take -

1. Peter plans to take golf lessons.
2. John will take a new wife soon.
3. President Jones will take the oath of office tomorrow.
4. Can you take the heat?

5. Mary's vaccination didn't take.

We as teachers cannot take it for granted that a student will automatically know the meaning of the word as the context changes. When we learn the meaning of a word in one context we form a partial concept. Unless we add to or change that concept the meaning we bring to the word is only that meaning which we have developed. We expand our concept when we are exposed to additional information or in other words we determine that in a given content a word can have more than one meaning. Word meanings do not automatically transfer from one situation to another. The meaning must be developed in context in which the word is found. What a context may reveal to a particular reader will depend upon his previous experience. It is unfortunately true that some words exist for most of us as words--spoken or printed symbols having only the vaguest of meaning for us. We have not tried to tie these words into our personal experience. We have not applied them as labels to physical objects or to the observable qualities of physical objects or to the behavior of persons, places, or things.

A word, according to Marksheffel, may represent a concept, but the concept resides within the student, not the word. No one can give a student a concept. One can teach him to pronounce a word, provide him a definition of the word, and arrange activities in which the word is used, but he, and he alone, must develop his concepts. The teacher's job is to arrange activities that involve the student in direct and vicarious experiences that lead him to

develop concepts himself.

Even though time permits that we can only cover two strategies - purpose for reading and vocabulary development - that a content area teacher can develop to help improve learning and understanding in his content, these two strategies are of paramount importance for the student to have a minimum amount of success in mastering the content. Furthermore, we are suggesting that the content area teacher can incorporate "reading skills" while teaching his content and not detract from either.

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